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The Social Survival of Mormonism: A Comparative Study

The Antebellum Period of American history was a time rife with new ideas about the social order and how to implement them, often in liberal and radical ways. Utopian societies based on both religious doctrine and radical marriage structures were a perfect testing ground for these ideas. The religious movement of Mormonism, founded by Joseph Smith in the 1820's and expanded during the remainder of the century, is one particular attempt to create a perfect society, separate from mainstream American society. The Mormons' most radical social contribution to the American experience was the practice of polygamy as a recognized, and oft encouraged, family pattern. Many other experimental societies attempted similar alterations to the normal family structure, with the Shakers and Oneida Perfectionists being notable examples. While many utopian communities were successful for a short time, none approached the number of adherents and lasting social importance of the Mormon movement. The religious and social differences between the Shakers, Perfectionists, and Mormons make a good comparative study to understand that the conservative religious structure and gender roles of the Mormon faith allowed it to flourish during the Antebellum Period and survive into the twentieth century.

The Shakers were a new religious group that had origins in Europe. Ann Lee, an English member directly responsible for the expansion of the movement, experienced powerful visions during an imprisonment in 1770 that she was serving for disturbing the peace. Her vision depicted Adam and Eve in sexual intercourse, and she had finally found the root of all evil, and sin, that she had been seeking, and thus, celibacy was a necessity.[i] This conclusion no doubt stemmed from personal difficulties that she had suffered with the overlap of her sexual and religious duties. She had lost all of her children in early childhood or infancy, and the Church continuously reminded her of her conjugal duties to her husband, but these two experiences left her terrified of intercourse.[ii]

The Shakers were influenced by other sects and beliefs in their early years. One of these was a group of French revivalists, called the Camisard Prophets, who practiced intense shaking and speaking in tongues during moments of extreme religious fervor.[iii] The Quakers also had a hand in helping the Shakers start, with a small religious group started by Jane and

James Wardley, who broke off from the group when they felt that the Quakers had lost the necessary energy to continue expanding. This was the group that Ann Lee belonged to during her revelation in 1770 and during her continued revelations throughout the decade that caused her to be fully committed to her belief about the evils of carnal intercourse and the oppressive sexual roles forced on women.[iv]

The movement, which had little success in England, spread to the American colonies in 1774. There, the people were receptive to new religious ideas because of the effects that The First Great Awakening of the 1740's had on the stability of the already established religious organizations and the desire to start revivals and innovations of all kinds.[v] The group had its first major increase in 1780, and continued to grow thanks to several unique aspects of the movement. A primary factor for the popularity of the American Shakers was Ann Lee herself, who was a powerfully charismatic leader, and was often viewed in awe by new believers. A second, equally important factor was the novelty of the revivalist activities themselves, as many people felt that the Shakers were clearly being influenced by the supernatural, though opponents to the movement attributed these to the Devil, rather than God. The Shakers' practice of a liberal Biblical translation that focused on symbolic interpretation rather than literal interpretation also served to attract many different people with varying beliefs.[vi]

Though the Shakers flourished through the Antebellum period and into the nineteenth century, the group still had significant internal and external difficulties. The biggest crisis for the Shaker community, was internal, and was a difficulty in sustaining members. In the New Lebanon Second Family, specifically, the number of people who joined after 1830 was vastly greater than those who joined before, with more joining in the thirties than the previous two decades combined, and almost three times as many in the combined decades of the forties and fifties as in the thirties. However, these numbers were counterbalanced by the fact that the average length of stay for men halved in the thirties, to around fifteen years, was cut by two-thirds in the forties, to about five years, and by the sixties was down to only two years. Though women stayed longer, their numbers followed similar patterns. According to records, almost seventy percent of men and fifty percent of women left for their own reasons.[vii]

Though the Shakers had a lot to offer, especially in regards to improving equality between males and females, they were unable to keep lifetime members beyond the few that joined the movement early. There are several reasons to attribute this fact to. The community had strict doctrine, including celibacy and the inclusion of revivalist practices, but no strict belief pattern. It is possible that the members did not feel compelled to follow the Shakers or justified in these other extreme practices with such a liberal approach to Biblical interpretation. Of greater difficulty to the Shakers was the prospect of increasing

their numbers. Celibacy meant they could only increase by recruiting from the outside. Young people, who could potentially be long lasting and productive members, were important targets for recruitment efforts, but this group had its problems. In some Ohio communities, there are records of the youth mocking and criticizing Shaker practices, and worse yet for the group's stability and continuation, leaving the community once they could sustain themselves. This problem was compounded by the fact that when youth joined they added little or no property to the community, weakening it economically.[viii]

Unlike the Shakers, the Oneida Perfectionists were a completely American group and movement. The founder, John Noyes, led several followers from a community at Putney, Vermont after his radical social and sexual idea of complex marriage became the object of significant criticism. They then settled at Oneida to begin a communistic society.[ix] Noyes' ideas for complex marriage came to him during years in his late teens and early twenties when he struggled with religious principles and often obsessively read the Bible. He came to the conclusion, ultimately, that God, rather than expecting perfection in outward practice, expected it in internal feelings and devotions. He finally wrote, in a private letter that was later published without his knowledge, that he believed in the perfect world, marriage would no longer exist, and there would be a freedom for all people to enjoy sexual intercourse with any other.[x]

Noyes thought deeply on his position, and his justification for complex marriage was reached through various thought processes. Initially, Noyes considered the benefits of celibacy as a legitimate practice for his church. Upon further contemplation, however, he determined that celibacy was not a viable option to express the "full range of human experience,"[xi] and disregarded it as an unnecessary limitation. Though Noyes was often racked with doubt about his faith, the 1837 marriage to another man of Abigail Merwin set his thoughts on the path to his eventual decision to institute complex marriage. He believed that it was his purpose to work towards ushering in the new world that he envisioned and that it would undoubtedly have difficult social implications and the transition would be a painful process.[xii]

Forming a small, focused community was a natural step for Noyes to take in an attempt to implement complex marriage. He began this community with a marriage of convenience to Harriet Holton, who was sufficiently obedient to him as a religious leader, as well as offering him social standing and the money and equipment necessary to spread his word.[xiii] Noyes continued to develop his community by claiming leadership over his own family, centering his Perfectionist community at Putney around it. Noyes continued to build around a communal ideal, as complex marriage necessitates, and focused on two types of movements in the Antebellum period: religious revivalism, and socialism. These both became major aspects of Noyes' communities at Putney and Oneida, though his priority was

on the religious institutions in his societies, as his view of complex marriage was first and foremost, a religious one, dependent on the idea of a reborn world, where current norms would be dismantled.[xiv]

Noyes' community soon encountered problems, specifically with three of his followers, with the issue of marriage and sex. Noyes used this opportunity to pave the way for completing his project of complex marriage for the entire Putney community by developing new and unusual forms of birth control and social regulations. The first was male continence, which was the reservation of ejaculation at any time during or after sexual intercourse. This process was an answer to Noyes' personal interest in sparing his wife from further painful childbirths, avoiding celibacy, and avoiding the waste of sperm that Noyes disagreed with.[xv] The second form of control was mutual criticism, which dealt directly with social harmony within his communities. The practice involved the group critique of an individual, who remained silent except to "correct obvious errors of fact."[xvi] The goal of the practice was to enlighten the members of their own strengths and weaknesses, so that they may better serve the communal good.

Eventually, Noyes took his sexual and social experiment to a level above complex marriage which would eventually be its downfall. He termed his particular form of scientific propagation "stirpiculture" and it would allow specific community members to reproduce at the permission of a committee. This new practice intensified already present tensions within the complex marriage system that denied the same quantity of sexual activity to young members and those of lower status as those of higher status enjoyed. The fact that Noyes' age was affecting his ability to lead the group and no competent leader had risen to the occasion caused the eventual breakup of the system, which formally disbanded in 1879.[xvii]

Noyes' experiments with social control and non-traditional family patterns approached many of the same problems as the Shakers' own attempts. They both sought different sexual practices as a way to perfect humanity, and Noyes' introduction of male continence followed the same spirit of Ann Lee's beliefs about celibacy. Both of these systems were an answer, at least in part, to the suffering and childbearing roles of women. Though the celibate and complex marriage systems were essentially opposite, they both brought a certain level of equality to the genders, and the communities themselves were liberal in their treatment of women, allowing them to achieve some level of importance and leadership within the religious and communal hierarchy of the organizations.

The religious movement of Mormonism, like Noyes' Perfectionists, also had strictly American origins. Like Noyes' group and the American Shaker movement, Mormonism, and its church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, began in New England and specifically, Western New York, which was a popular region for these utopian societies. Unlike the Perfectionists, who only moved once, and a short distance at that, to Oneida, and

unlike the Shakers, who started several relatively independent communities, the early history of Mormonism is one of constant westward migration on a massive scale. The beginnings of Mormonism, in New York, were under the leadership of founder and Prophet Joseph Smith. He founded the new faith under the claim he had experienced visions of the angel Moroni which led Smith to the location of golden plates and two stones to help him translate them, which would eventually be published as the Book of Mormon. The book contained the meaning of the Gospel that Christ had delivered to the earlier inhabitants of North America, a group of Hebrews who migrated to the continent in 600 B.C.[xviii]

The Book of Mormon was met with heavy resistance in the area around Smith's home, with many people attempting to discredit the prophet. Some were concerned that Mormonism offered a challenge to Christianity and the existing social order. Others attacked Smith directly, claiming that he was a religious fraud, hoping only to profit from selling the book to naive religious enthusiasts.[xix] In other parts of the country, such as Ohio, Vermont, and Massachusetts, however, where the publication was not suffering from the same boycott, it attracted a significant amount of attention. Smith was undeterred by his initial difficulty in promoting the book, and the zeal with which he believed was responsible for leading a new religious order to establish a second Zion and await the judgment of Christ empowered him to continue recruiting members.[xx]

Eventually, Smith led his group of followers west, with the hopes of establishing a community in Missouri. He sent a preliminary group, which stopped first in Ohio, a popular destination for many utopianists leaving New England, and they attracted many converts and eventual church leaders, including Sidney Rigdon, one of Smith's most trusted associates in the early history of the church. Pleased with the immediate success at Kirtland, Smith altered his plans, and chose to establish a presence in Ohio before moving on to Missouri.[xxi] In 1832, he traveled to Independence, Missouri to help the group he had sent ahead, and while there established a government for the growing church and was named president of the organization.[xxii] The Mormons' westward migration continued to Illinois, where Smith was eventually murdered in Carthage by a mob. Afterwards, Brigham Young, a convert from New England, assumed leadership of the church and led the group to the territory of Utah, which was supposed to be their Zion and ultimate destination.[xxiii]

Like the Shakers and Perfectionists, the Mormons took a radical approach to redesigning family structures and marriage and sex patterns. The Mormons' approach was an embrace of polygamy, the act of one man having multiple wives. Joseph Smith first considered polygamy in 1831, while he was studying the Old Testament and questioned why various figures, such as Abraham, Jacob, and Moses possessed multiple wives.[xxiv] Smith's questioning stemmed from his revivalist attitude towards religion, which he extended to the New and Old Testaments alike, unlike contemporary revivalists that generally only looked to

the New Testament. Though Smith did not formally express an idea of instituting polygamy at that time, rumors started and by 1835 it was necessary for the Church to issue the "Chapter for Rules of Marriage among the Saints," which expressed that monogamy was the only accepted marriage pattern of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.[xxv]

Afterwards, sanctioned polygamy went through several steps, including its first introduction to a select group of church leaders in 1843. Smith introduced the doctrine with one of his revelations, which would later become the one-hundred thirty-second entry into the Doctrine and Covenants. The revelation stressed the importance of sealing marriage within the faith, because all earthly covenants would be lost upon death, so it was the only way for marriage to last into the afterlife and through eternity. Further, it was the only way for Mormons to achieve the highest level of being in the afterlife, becoming gods in their own right. It also established polygamy as a legitimate practice, using the aforementioned Old Testament figures as precedent, and justifying it by arguing that the early religious figures acted only as commanded by God.[xxvi] The public announcement of this revelation was released in Utah in 1852, where the church felt they had sufficient autonomy to practice without fear of reproach.

Though polygamy found strong support in Utah in the middle of the century, by the end of the century it was in decline because of attack from outside sources and inside reluctance of younger members of the church to practice it. In the years preceding the official statement in 1890 disavowing polygamy, it was already in danger. Kathryn M. Daynes attributes the lessening interest of Mormon women to participate to greater economic and educational opportunities as the Utah territory grew and the original Mormon community began losing its solitude as non-believers increased in number. External forces still played a part, however, as federal legislation against polygamy became more impressive in the seventies and eighties.[xxvii] Even though the Mormons tried to mitigate the damage with territorial laws, the system could not withstand the external and internal pressures, so it finally was abandoned with the 1890 Manifesto by President Wilford Woodruff.

The Mormon experiment with polygamy was the largest of the three movements during the Antebellum Period. The sanctioned marriage system also outlasted the Perfectionists' complex marriage, and though the Shakers' celibate system continued, uninterrupted, the Mormon movement as a whole was significantly more successful and continues to impact American culture in present times. The grand scale of Joseph Smith's movement and the number of followers it attracted are reason enough to investigate the polygamous experiment in greater detail to determine what social change it offered, and how, against public opinion and political pressures, the Mormons continued to justify the practice until the end of the nineteenth century.

As stated earlier, the revelation that Joseph Smith received concerning polygamy was

first recorded and made known to select members in 1843, and publicly announced by Brigham Young in 1852. The revelation, however, is only marginally concerned with the practice of polygamy, and the focus is on the new covenant that the Lord had revealed to Smith, dismissing all secular marriages and denying eternal continuance to any that was not sanctioned directly by the church, and, specifically, Smith himself. This had immediate religious importance to the group, as it outlined the necessary steps of eternal continuance in the afterlife.[xxviii]

The parts of the revelation that deal directly with polygamy essentially state that the practice is acceptable because the Saints are the descendants of Abraham, allowing them to inherit the promises God made to him. The justification for the practice is that "Abraham received all things, whatsoever he received, by revelation and commandment by my word, saith the Lord."[xxix] The gift of multiple wives to Abraham, then, was to fulfill the Lord's promise that his descendants would become too numerous to count. The revelation where polygamy was introduced treats the practice as little more than an afterthought, an addition that related little to the new covenant that was the main focus of the revelation. Further, the justification for both polygamy and the new covenant was a way to cement the power of the Lord and the earthly prophet, as only the prophet, through the Lord's anointment, could seal marriages to eternity, and polygamy was only acceptable because the Lord made it so.

Regardless of the intent of the revelation, it still sanctioned polygamy and inspired the interest of contemporary non-believers to investigate the peculiar institution. Victor Cram, a Mormon builder in Salt Lake City, shared his ideas regarding the justification of polygamy with J.H. Beadle, a non-Mormon who lived in Salt Lake City in the 1860's in order to investigate the faith. Cram's reasoning that polygamy would regenerate and strengthen humanity, which was facing a serious decline.[xxx] It is doubtful that this was a unique, or even rarely held view, as it falls in line with the idea present in the Doctrine and Covenants of multiplying the descendents of Abraham. However, Cram goes on further to state that polygamy is necessary in the current age, while it was not in earlier times, because of abortion. Polygamy would help to make up for the number of lives that were being lost by abortion, and as a way to still its popularity.[xxxi]

There is further justification for polygamy, though it again relates to increasing and regenerating humanity. In April of 1854, Joseph Smith published an article that prophesized the inevitable civil war between the North and South, beginning with the secession of South Carolina. Although he incorrectly predicts that the war will spill out to Europe and eventually encompass the whole globe, thus allowing for the Saints to rise up and restore humanity, and necessitating a large population to replace the "death and misery of many souls."[xxxii] It is important to note, however, that though the prospect of war and the dangers of abortion justify polygamy on human terms, the Saints still defer to the commandment of

God as the only necessary and true justification of the practice.

Beadle later reflects on the importance of polygamy as a "necessary and logical outgrowth of the system"[xxxiii] of Mormon faith. He discusses the religious importance of family, and the exaltation that is spoken of in the revelation regarding the new covenant. The individual glory of a man or woman in heaven is dependent upon the size of the family on earth that is eternally with them in the afterlife. This idea allows polygamy to serve a social function, as the number of wives a man has reflects his rank in the church and eventual glory in heaven. For women who can not have children, this is even more important, as they can share in the glory of a man with many wives, even if they can not produce a large family of their own.[xxxiv] The social impact of polygamy goes further, as Beadle writes that Mormons disregard the love that Gentiles know, and acknowledge a community of respect, support and friendship.[xxxv] In this sense, polygamy redefines the emotional ties that hold a family together, seeking a purer, more communal pattern that does not support the monogamy that they, strangely like the Shakers and Perfectionists, consider selfish.

In her book, Ann Eliza Young, nineteenth wife of Brigham Young, discusses further justification for polygamy, in the interest of expanding the influence of the church, given by Joseph Smith himself. In his first public announcement of the practice at Nauvoo in 1840 he explains that polygamy will work as a tool to expand the church to a global scale. Concerning the potential conversion of people from polygamous nations he said "we must have polygamy among us as an established institution, and then they can bring all their wives with them."[xxxvi] According to Young, polygamy was encouraged and stressed openly once the group arrived in Utah as a way to build up the kingdom.[xxxvii] Both of these instances treat polygamy as a tool to increase the influence of Mormonism on a national and global scale.

Though the church and individual members offered several reasons for the importance of polygamy, as a social, political, and religious tool, there was still heavy opposition both inside and outside the church. Some of the most verbose arguments against polygamy come directly from the women, both those involved as plural wives and those outside of it. One of the women Beadle spoke to stressed that she would never marry a pluralist, and indeed, married a Gentile instead. She cited specific instances of violence and jealousy within plural families, stating even that some men would encourage younger wives to abuse the older ones. She did make the point, however, that this was not always the case, citing her own experience growing up in a plural household, where her father stressed respect within the family.[xxxviii] Ann Eliza Young discusses this idea further in many instances in her book, and as a concluding statement she remarks that "she has yet to learn of one woman happy in [polygamy]"[xxxix] but that the women feel they must be at fault, rather than the system.

Beadle offers a more interesting critique of polygamy in his book, questioning the

propriety of the system even within Mormon religious tradition. He quotes the revelation on the new covenant specifically, coming to the conclusion that by proof of the past tense used, Joseph Smith had already practiced it before it was officially sanctioned by the Lord in the revelation. Further, he cites the *Book of Mormon* itself, stating the Lord explicitly denied polygamy, desiring each man to have one wife and vice versa, and even making a statement against concubines. Beadle is unconvinced at the Mormons' attempt to rectify this inconsistency, as they argued that the new covenant replaced even statements in the *Book of Mormon* itself.[xl]

Polygamy was finally disavowed by order of Wilford Woodruff, President of the Church, in 1890. His justification for doing so was that the Church must respect the constitutional laws of the land. However, this was not issued until 1890, and the Church had been having legal difficulties involving polygamy for several decades, essentially since its inception. Further, there had been specific federal laws through the 1880's punishing polygamy and limiting the law making power of the Mormon Church in Utah.

It is evident that Woodruff's declaration was one of concession, then, that the Church had lost the legal battle over polygamy with the United States, and as Daynes argues, the internal struggle of convincing younger women of the good of the system. The "1890 Manifesto," however, does not fully get rid of the system, but only encourages its members to avoid any marriage "forbidden by the law of the land."[xli]

The Shakers, Perfectionists, and Mormons all established faith based communities in an attempt to improve, and ultimately perfect, society during the Antebellum period. All three were established as variant, radical forms of Christianity, and all three attempted to change society's marriage patterns and social norms, with all three embracing socialist or communal approaches to the economy of their communities. All three marriage experiments also failed because of their own follies. The Shakers could not keep up their numbers on account of celibacy, the Perfectionists' complex marriage collapsed under the anger of the less fortunate members, and Mormon polygamy fell to the social inequality it offered women and the legal difficulties it faced. Of these three, the Shakers' and Perfectionists' systems both improved the equality of women and reduced the responsibilities of childbearing to zero or nearly zero. The Mormon structure had the opposite approach, as it put more pressure on women to have children, and strengthened the inequality of women in the family structure. Yet, the Mormon faith was able to survive the destruction of its marriage experiment, unlike the Perfectionists, thanks to strict doctrine and leadership within the Church. It also avoided the problems that the Shakers faced with declining numbers and an unfocused Biblical translation. The experiment allowed them to increase their numbers, and the new faith successfully attracted outside members, increasing the Church and even allowing them to survive several splits and differences of opinion. While polygamy was the

most socially radical aspect of Mormonism, it was its conservative approach to religion and the family that gave it the stability it needed to survive the Antebellum Period.

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[viii] Catherine M. Rokicky, *Creating a Perfect World: Religious and Secular Utopias in Nineteenth-Century Ohio* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002) 21.
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[xi] Foster, 79.
[xii] Foster, 80-81.
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[xiv] Foster, 85-86.
[xv] Foster, 93-95.
[xvi] Foster, 99.
[xvii] Foster, 119-120.
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[xix] Rokicky, 89.
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[xxiii] Rokicky, 108.
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[xxxiii] Beadle, 352.
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[xxxviii] Beadle, 263.
[xxxix] Young, 597.
[xl] Beadle, 337-338.
[xli] Smith, 256.